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ABSTRACT

A solid body of empirical research supports the view that educational level is strongly related to occupational attainment. In the final analysis, however, it appears that although education does lead to a better job, how much better is determined by one's gender and race. Research on the relative need for training in basic, general employability and transferable skills indicates that training in proper work habits, attitudes, and interpersonal skills is generally considered as important to job success as is training in the basic skills. At least one researcher has hypothesized that although the schools are teaching the transferable skills necessary for employment (mathematics, communication, interpersonal, reasoning, and manipulative skills), students are not being taught how to transfer these skills from school to work. Many young people and women entering or returning to the work force are not even aware of the transferability of their skills to the workplace. Most research indicates that the workplace remains the site of most learning concerning work. The current public education system must do more to show teachers how to teach transfer skills so that future workers will not see their skills as irrelevant, past accomplishments but will instead view them as tools for the future. (MN)

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OVERVIEW

ERIC[®] DIGEST NO. 50

**Clearinghouse on Adult, Career,
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EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT

What Are the Issues?

Americans have believed for nearly a century that education leads to a good job. As working-class children began to fill the schools in the early 1900s, public policy debates focused on how to provide these students with a useful education. Thus was laid the groundwork for contemporary vocational education and the perceived relationship between education and work.

Many questions remain, a century later, on the implications of this relationship. The chief issues currently being explored include the following:

- Does more education always lead to a better job?
- What skills and attitudes do future workers need to learn?
- How should work skills and attitudes be taught?

Each of these questions has been the subject of much research and some controversy. This ERIC Digest will examine major findings related to these issues and discuss implications the findings raise.

Does More Education Always Lead to a Better Job?

There is a solid body of empirical work supporting the view that educational level is strongly related to occupational attainment. Similarly, research on type of education (i.e., vocational, college prep) shows some of the expected relationships to employment, wages, and so forth. However, this kind of research—known as the status attainment model—has been more successful in explaining the relationship between education and work for white men than it has for women and minorities (Fitzgerald 1985).

Fitzgerald (1985) outlines some of the possible reasons for the differences in returns of education for black and white workers. These factors include different levels and quality of educational achievement; different patterns of occupational choice; changes in patterns of job availability, education, and military service; and lingering effects of segregation. Although each factor has been shown to have some relationship to the differences in employment and earnings between black and white workers, Fitzgerald concludes that "a large part of the problem lies not in these variables, but rather in continued patterns of employer discrimination in hiring and compensation" (p. 9).

Research reveals that there is a strongly positive relationship between education and women's vocational participation and occupational attainment. The more education a woman receives, the more likely she is to work outside the home, to enjoy her work, and to advance on the job. However, women, like other minorities, have been unable to translate their education into the same financial and status benefits that are available to men (Fitzgerald 1985).

One of the classic explanations for the lower returns that women receive on their education is that women choose, or are channeled into, occupational areas that are traditionally low paying. Therefore, sex equity continues to be a critical issue for vocational education (Mertens and Gardner 1981). In the

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What Skills and Attitudes Do Future Workers Need to Learn?

Basic Skills

All research agrees on the importance of basic skills (here defined as literacy and computation) for employability and productivity. However, there is also wide agreement that many American youth are deficient in these necessary skills. Fitzgerald (1985) cites three sets of employer surveys that paint a bleak picture of students' grasp of basic skills as follows:

- A survey of 178 employers in the northeast found that employers rated basic academic skills in the top 5 most needed employment competencies; the same group found young workers most deficient in this area.
- Another survey determined through interviews that two out of three entry-level applicants were eliminated on the basis of a written job application (sometimes accompanied by a brief interview). Problems included inability to communicate, inaccuracies in the application, poor spelling, and poor grammar.
- A third survey reported that employers want youth to be competent at basic reading, writing, speaking, and math skills and are willing to teach them whatever else they need to know.

General Employability Skills

Work habits, attitudes, and interpersonal skills are generally considered important to job success, in fact, as important as basic skills. Again, Fitzgerald (1985) cites employer surveys that give information about desirable traits. Examples include the following:

- One researcher has proposed a list of 63 affective work competencies garnered from survey data. These competencies include such behaviors as punctuality, cooperativeness, loyalty, and judgement.
- Employers in another study ranked positive attitude, dependability, and communication skills as the most important worker attributes, even ahead of basic skills.
- A third study found that although youths know which behaviors positively influence employers, they do not understand the full effects of negative influences, such as tardiness or sloppy appearance.

Transferable Skills

A transferable skill is one that is applicable to more than one situation. All skills are transferable, but some are obviously more useful in that they are applicable to a wider variety of situations. Sjogren (1977) suggests that there are five basic groups of highly transferable skills including mathematics skills, communication skills, interpersonal skills, reasoning skills, and manipulative skills.

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Fitzgerald (1985) discusses two studies of transferable skills, noting that most research has resulted in similar lists.

- In the first, the researcher talked with educators and employers to find which skills are highly transferable. The list includes communicating, working with others, problem solving, organizing, and other social and analytical skills.
- In the second, the researchers asked a National sample of the general adult population to rank skills they found important to life and work. Among the most important were found to be basic and competency skills (reading, writing, math, and using tools), getting along with others, dealing with work pressures, following rules, and maintaining a positive work attitude.

The skills to be taught are known, and they seem to be the ones that schools try to teach. Why, then, is there data indicating that workers are deficient in transferable skills? Fitzgerald (1985) hypothesizes that the schools teach transferable skills, but they do not teach students how to transfer these skills from school to work. She adds that youth and women returning to the work force are not even aware of the transferability of their skills to the workplace.

Transfer Skills

Transfer skills are cognitive functions that facilitate the transfer of learned skills from one setting to the next. They include such abilities as cue recognition, discrimination, association, and rule application. According to Fitzgerald (1985), transfer skills are generally not taught in the schools, but they should be.

Where and How Should Work Skills Be Taught?

The main focus of research on this issue has been on the distinction between traditional and alternative learning environments. Fitzgerald (1985) cites two major studies, one conducted at the National Center for Research in Vocational Education and the other at the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory (NWREL).

Utilizing surveys of the general public, teachers, students, and employers, the National Center study asked about the source of learning for four competency skill groups: traditional job values and expectations, job advancement and promotion, taking charge, and finding one's place. All surveyed groups believed that all these competencies were learned on the job although they did not agree that this should necessarily be so. Fitzgerald (1985) comments on the problem this finding creates, particularly for minority youth who cannot get hired because they lack employability skills and do not learn employability skills until they have a job.

The NWREL study examined the concept of youth responsibility. Questions attempted to define what it is, where it is learned, and how it is demonstrated. Students said they learned responsibility at home, at work, and at school, in that order. However, they felt they behaved most responsibly at work and least responsibly at school.

The common thread running through the research indicates that the workplace is the site of most learning concerning work. The implication is that since traditional classroom instruction has not produced the desired outcomes, alternatives should be considered. Fitzgerald (1985) suggests the possibility of using experience-based career education as one such alternative. This method is possibly more effective because of its close ties to the workplace and its emphasis on the "real world." Fitzgerald calls for more research in this area to multiply and improve the alternatives.

What Are the Implications for Practice?

Although it has been noted that a good education and a good job do not necessarily go hand-in-hand, certainly the schools can make improvements that will increase the student's employability opportunities. The first priority, the experts agree, is to make the student proficient at basic skills. For the young person of today, that means not only literacy and computation, but also basic computer literacy.

Next, general employability skills must be taught thoughtfully, both through words and actions. The teacher who is habitually late to class is teaching students that punctuality is not important. If students are to learn responsibility, it must be given to them in gradual and increasing amounts at home and at school. Getting along with others and working with others may be best taught by including group assignments in the curriculum.

Transfer skills are widely untaught in the current public education system. Research needs to be done that will show teachers how to teach transfer skills so that future workers will not see their skills as irrelevant, past accomplishments but rather as tools for the future.

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This ERIC Digest is based on the following publication:

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